



Irving Berlin

In the early 20th century New York City was teeming with self-educated musicians and composers eager to make a hit. Before the spread of the phonograph, the radio, or the movies, they counted on selling their songs to music hall and theater producers, or to the thousands of sheet-music publishers who made up "Tin Pan Alley." Most of these men could bang out their tunes with some authority on an upright piano, but Irving Berlin, who became the most successful popular composer of the century, couldn't even do that. For most of his career, Irving Berlin sang or hummed his songs to a musical secretary to write down for him;

but then, Irving Berlin had never planned on becoming a composer.. He was born with the name Israel Baline, in Russia. He came to New York with his Jewish parents at four years old and lost his father, a Jewish Cantor, at age eight. A Cantor is person who sings in the synagogue for temple services, a kind of song leader and soloist. Like his older siblings, he hit the streets to help support the family, first as a newsboy and then as a singing waiter. From singing other people's songs, he learned what the customers liked, and he began writing his own.

'Baline' became 'Berlin' after a misprint on the cover of his first published song. The seventeen-year-old had only written the lyrics to that one, and for the next few years he continued to seek out more experienced composers to set music to his words. However, Irving Berlin dictated his own tunes when no other composer was available. Both he and his publisher gradually noticed that the songs for which he wrote

both words and music were more popular than his collaborations.

"Alexander's Ragtime Band" made Berlin world famous in 1911. In the next fifty years he published over 1,500 songs; including....

God Bless America

Oh How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning
(which he sang in his movie)

Putting on the Ritz

Cheek to Cheek

Blue Skies

There's No Business Like Show Business

Easter Parade

White Christmas

As he became more and more famous and wealthy, he built his own Broadway theater and established his own publishing company. In time he learned to compose on the piano, a little. He picked out all his tunes on the black keys of the piano, and had a special tuning lever to make them change pitch. But in spite of all these limitations Berlin could write a great tune and catchy lyrics. He wrote a famous musical called "Annie Get Your Gun," it was complex and intriguing, this musical story of Annie Oakley was a big hit then, and is still performed today.

1. Irving Berlin was the son of a Jewish Cantor. What is a cantor?
2. Explain how Irving Berlin wrote songs on his piano.
3. Name three of Irving Berlin's famous songs.
4. How did Irving Berlin learn what kind of songs the public would like and would buy?
5. How many songs did Irving Berlin publish in his lifetime?